

THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
PANEL DISCUSSION, APRIL 11, 2007

*“THE ROADS TAKEN AND NOT TAKEN:
ROBERT MOSES AND TRANSPORTATION”*

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED

NURTURE NEW YORK’S NATURE,
THEODORE W. KHEEL,
PRESIDENT

I. THE ROAD NOT TAKEN,

By Theodore W. Kheel

The Museum of the City of New York has kindly agreed to allow Nurture New York's Nature, a nonprofit foundation that I head, to make available excerpts from Robert A. Caro's book *The Power Broker* to those attending the Panel Discussion on "*The Roads Taken and Not Taken: Robert Moses and Transportation.*"

The Museum is greatly to be commended for hosting a panel on this important subject. The discussion helps fill a gap in the current exhibits on Moses, and the book that accompanies them, entitled "*Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York,*" which provide a reassessment of Moses' career but largely omit his role with respect to mass transportation.

Transportation is one of the most pressing issues facing our city today. According to a background paper prepared by the National Commission on Energy Policy, New York is presently the *second most congested city in the country.*¹ A recent study by the Partnership for New York— a group of two hundred chief executive officers from New York City's top corporate, investment and entrepreneurial firms— estimated the economic costs of gridlock to the city at \$13 billion a year.² And that figure does not even take into account the health costs associated with the pollution created by automobiles.

1. <http://www.energycommission.org/files/finalReport/III.5.a%20-%20Congestion%20Charging-VMT.pdf>.

2. <http://www.nycp.org/publications/Growth%20or%20Gridlock.pdf>.

Although Moses' role in constructing highways, bridges and tunnels is commemorated in the exhibits and new book, his role with respect to mass transit is not discussed in any significant way. In one chapter of *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, Owen Gutfreund concludes that Moses' roads created a "balanced transport system, combining extensive subway and commuter rail lines with a far flung web of major roads," but says no more on what Moses did or did not do with respect to mass transit. In the introduction to the book, Hilary Ballon and Kenneth Jackson, its principal authors, go a little further. They devote three paragraphs to mass transit, only to conclude that "It is true that Moses took no action to save either the nickel fare or the subways. But those responsibilities were not his."

I have personal experience with Robert Moses' role in this area, and that role was a memorable one. Robert Moses did not just promote the cause of the car— he fought against the cause of mass transportation. When I advocated during the 1960s that tolls on automobiles should be increased and the revenues used to help mass transit, Moses blasted me ferociously in a column he wrote in *Newsday*, stating that I had "gone berserk," that my scheme was "devilish demagoguery" and "too silly for words."

A fuller picture of the role Moses played with regard to mass transit is painted in Robert Caro's book, *The Power Broker*, which devotes more than seventy pages to this issue. Caro's depiction of Moses is precisely the recounting that the exhibits and the Ballon and Jackson book propose to reassess. The reassessment of Moses' role in the mass transit arena, however, is incomplete, because of the authors' view that mass transit was simply not Moses' responsibility.

The thrust of Caro's argument is that Moses' focus on building roads and bridges and tunnels for cars, together with his purposeful neglect of mass transit, harmed the city, and condemned New York commuters to traffic congestion for decades to come. To summarize Caro's text any further would be to do it an injustice. Instead, a few brief highlights are reproduced below in Part II, below, in the hope that these highlights will tempt you to read the more extensive excerpts reproduced in Part III, and to read Caro's full book thereafter.

It is my belief that an understanding of what went wrong a half century ago can provide us guidance in how to go forward today. Now as then, our focus should be not on catering to the automobile, but on providing the financial support needed to encourage commuters to use mass transit. I hope you will think on this, as you sit in your car in traffic, or seek to use the city's aging mass transit system.